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Serbia's inclusive education reform: A journey of systemic and sustainable change

Case study

Serbia proved that deep systemic reform is possible – even terminology like "uneducable" was scrapped as the country embraced a culture of support for every learner. A key insight from Serbia is the importance of embedding inclusion into the fabric of the education system, rather than treating it as a separate program. Serbia didn't create a parallel inclusive system; it transformed the mainstream system itself. The lesson for others is clear: lasting change comes when inclusion is woven into all policies, teacher development, and school processes. Serbia's long-term approach also shows that patience and persistence pay off. Over 15 years, the country kept adjusting and improving its strategies – and today serves as a regional example that with the right mix of legislation, training, and community engagement, no child needs to be left out of learning.

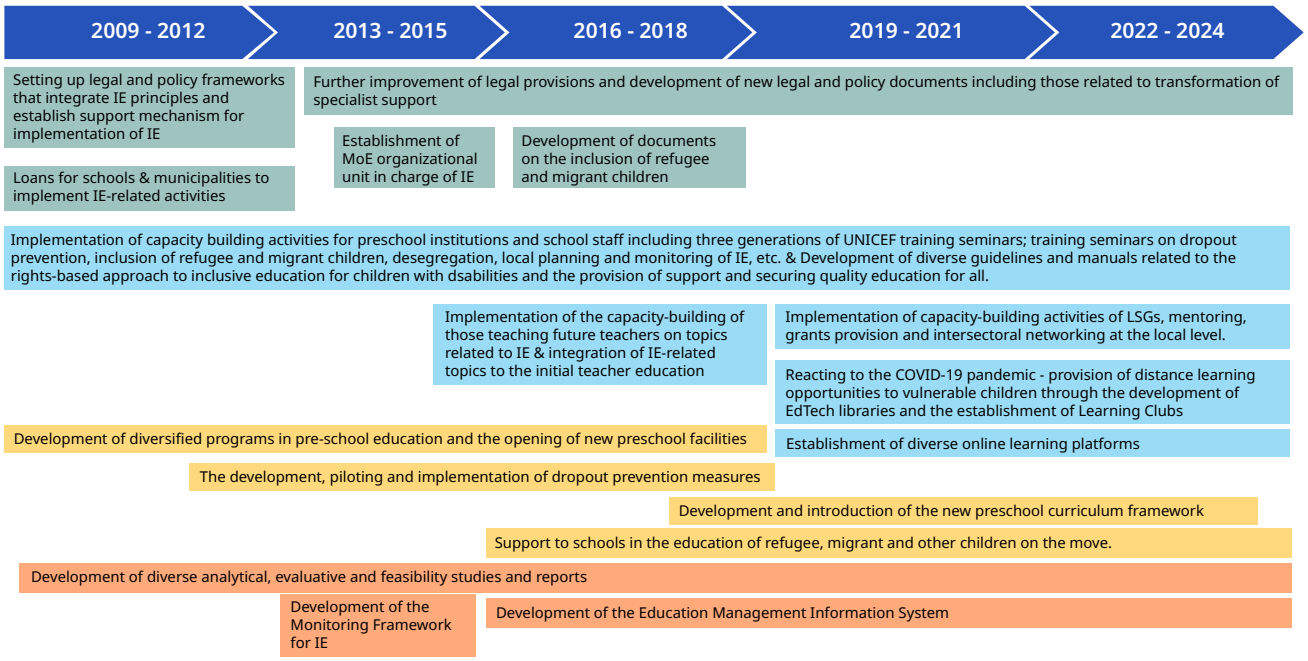
Serbia's journey towards inclusive education began with groundbreaking legislation in 2009, which guaranteed every child's right to learn in mainstream schools. Since then, the country has woven inclusion into the fabric of its education system. Thousands of children from vulnerable groups – including children with disabilities, Roma children, and those from low-income families – are now learning alongside their peers, supported by individualised education plans and trained staff. Teachers nationwide have been trained in inclusive methods, and hundreds of pedagogical assistants now support children with additional needs in classrooms. The number of students in segregated special schools has steadily declined as classroom support improves and attitudes shift. Serbia's model emphasises support at all levels: schools have inclusive education teams and inter-sectoral support services, while national strategies and EU-backed investments strengthen teacher training and resources. This dedication to inclusion represents not just a policy, but a change in culture – moving from isolation towards a sense of belonging for every child.

Drivers for inclusive education reform

Since the early 2000s, Serbia's education policy has increasingly emphasised equity and quality, aligning with national development goals and international commitments (e.g. the UN Conventions on the Rights of the Child and of Persons with Disabilities). Yet Serbia faced serious challenges in educational inclusion. Access to pre-primary education was very limited – facilities were scarce and unevenly distributed, so the children most in need (those from disadvantaged backgrounds, children with disabilities, Roma children) were often left behind. Enrolment practices for children with disabilities were also deeply problematic: local "categorization commissions" in health centers evaluated whether a child could *fit* the standard school environment. If deemed unable to adapt, a child was diverted to a special school or even labelled "uneducable," left at home or in an institution. A rigid notion of the "typical child" disproportionately affected vulnerable groups (children with disabilities, Roma, children in extreme poverty or remote areas). Many who might have thrived in mainstream schools were instead segregated or excluded entirely. This exclusionary approach led to severe inequities: children needlessly separated from families, overrepresentation of vulnerable children in special schools/classes, high dropout rates among Roma and other marginalised groups, and many children with disabilities not attending school at all.

Evidence of the system's shortcomings became more evident through the 2000s. Serbia's participation in PISA 2006 showed that the country continued to face serious challenges in terms of learning outcomes. Teacher training and professional development had been neglected for decades, leaving many educators ill-prepared to support diverse learners. Policymaking was seldom based on data or research. Yet amid these challenges, a consensus was emerging that improving equity would improve quality. Education leaders came to see inclusion not just as a social obligation but as a strategy to raise overall performance. Ensuring that *all* children -regardless of socio-economic status, disability, or ethnicity - could attend quality schools was viewed as foundational for a more open and just society, and essential to improving educational outcomes nationwide.

By 2009, Serbia was ready to fundamentally reform its approach to inclusive education (IE). The reform launched that year was comprehensive and system wide. It aimed to mainstream inclusive education in law and policy, strengthen institutions and actors at all levels to implement and monitor inclusion, increase equity and reduce segregation in schooling, and promote evidence-based decision-making. Importantly, while some measures targeted specific vulnerable groups (such as Roma inclusion programs), the ultimate vision was an education system where *every* child learns alongside their peers in regular schools, reaching their full potential in a supportive, non-segregated environment. Serbia's journey toward inclusion has been systemic, systematic, and focused on long-term sustainability – offering valuable lessons for other countries seeking to do the same. Serbia's reform can be viewed as four interconnected strategic priorities: (1) establishing an inclusive policy and institutional framework; (2) empowering teachers and other stakeholders through capacity-building; (3) instituting inclusive practices and support mechanisms at the school and community level; and (4) improving data use and monitoring to guide decisions. The following sections describe each of these, highlighting how the reform was pursued holistically and for the long run.



Establishing an inclusive policy framework

A critical moment came with the adoption of the Law on the Foundations of the Education System (LoFES) in 2009, which enshrined inclusive education principles into Serbia's legal framework. This law declared that everyone has the right to education and explicitly defined inclusion as a process of addressing and responding to the diverse needs of all learners by increasing their participation in mainstream schools and eliminating segregation and exclusion. LoFES 2009 became the backbone of the reform: it laid out principles and standards for pre-primary, primary, and secondary education, and set conditions for delivering education at all levels. Crucially, it instituted new mechanisms and supports to put inclusion into practice. For example, the law abolished the old "categorization" of children by disability, ending the routine tracking of certain children into special schools. It introduced rights to additional educational support for students with disabilities or learning difficulties, and required the creation of supportive structures at national, local, and school levels. Every school now had to form an Inclusive Education Team to plan for inclusion; Individual Education Plans (IEPs) were introduced to tailor instruction to students' needs; and the role of pedagogical assistants was created to help children (especially Roma or those with disabilities) participate in class. The law also encouraged a shift to a "curriculum for all," promoting differentiated

teaching and formative assessment so that learning outcomes could be achieved by every child through adapted approaches, rather than expecting children to conform to an inflexible curriculum.

In the years immediately following 2009, Serbia reinforced this legal foundation with by-laws and regulations to ensure the reforms took root. Between 2010 and 2012, new regulations streamlined school enrolment (making it easier for children with disabilities and other needs to enrol in mainstream schools) and defined specific additional support measures for any student who might require them. Notably, Intersectoral Committees (ISCs) were established in every municipality as interdisciplinary teams (education, health, and social welfare professionals) to assess children's needs for additional support and coordinate services. This was a step toward a holistic, multi-sector approach: rather than leaving schools on their own to handle special needs, ISCs would bring in health and social services alongside education. Additional by-laws introduced detailed procedures for developing and implementing IEPs and created roles such as pedagogical assistants (including Roma pedagogical assistants to bridge language and cultural gaps) to provide in-class support. Other supportive measures included introducing Resource Centres to assist mainstream schools, providing free textbooks and adapted materials for children with disabilities, and instituting affirmative action in secondary school admissions (e.g. reserved places and scholarships for Roma students and students with disabilities).

These early reforms were accelerated by international support – in particular, a World Bank education loan (2009–2012) that provided substantial resources to kick-start implementation of the new inclusive education policies. The World Bank funding enabled a nationwide rollout of key activities: training for teachers and school principals in inclusive practices; grants to roughly one-third of schools (across almost all municipalities) to initiate local inclusive education projects; municipal grants specifically to support inclusion of Roma children; development of policy documents (guidelines, rulebooks) and some reforms to financing for inclusion; and creation of national support mechanisms such as advisory bodies and professional networks for inclusive education. This infusion of resources in the early 2010s helped Serbia move quickly from legislation to action, ensuring the ideals of the 2009 law translated into changes in classrooms and communities.

Serbia also aligned other laws and sectoral policies with the new inclusive approach. Legislation in areas like financial support to families, health care, and social protection was amended to introduce measures facilitating inclusion (such as benefits and services for children with disabilities and their families), so that education reforms would not be undermined by conflicting policies. The Strategy for Education Development 2030 explicitly integrated inclusive education goals, reinforcing that improving quality and increasing coverage at all levels must include a focus on vulnerable groups and equitable access. In essence, within a few years inclusion went from a piloted concept to a guiding principle embedded across Serbia's education system and its broader social policy framework.

Another crucial step was creating a dedicated institutional home for inclusive education within the Ministry of Education. In 2015, the Ministry – with UNICEF's support – established a Group for Social Inclusion (later upgraded to the Department for Human and Minority Rights in Education) to coordinate, develop, and oversee inclusive education policy implementation and later renamed into Sector for Prevention and Protection of Violence and Inclusion of Vulnerable Groups with more employees to support this agenda. This permanent unit was charged with mainstreaming inclusive practices throughout the education sector, rather than relying on ad-hoc projects or NGOs. The unit leads initiatives on anti-discrimination, violence prevention in schools, and dropout prevention, in addition to core inclusion programs. Its creation reflects the systemic approach Serbia adopted – recognising that inclusion touches many aspects of education governance and thus requires a central coordinating body. (It also highlights UNICEF's role as a constant partner in the reform, from helping draft policies to building institutional capacity.) By establishing the legal and institutional framework and securing a coordinating hub in government, Serbia laid the groundwork for a sustainable reform that would survive beyond

individual projects or political cycles. Within a few years, inclusive education was embedded in laws, integrated into national budgets and data systems, and linked with related efforts like anti-discrimination campaigns – rather than being an isolated add-on initiative.

Building systemic capacity: teachers and stakeholders

Transforming laws and policies was only a first step; the success of inclusive education hinged on the capacity and mindset of those implementing it on the ground. Thus, a massive effort was made to equip teachers, school leaders, and other stakeholders with the skills and attitudes needed for inclusion. Beginning in 2009, Serbia launched intensive nationwide teacher training programs to improve classroom practices and help educators embrace inclusive principles. The initial wave of training (circa 2009–2013), led by the Ministry with support from UNICEF and other partners, aimed to initiate a mindset shift among educators. Many veteran teachers had never received formal training on inclusive pedagogy, so early sessions raised awareness about student diversity, challenged negative stereotypes (e.g. about children with disabilities or Roma children), and promoted the idea that every child can learn given the right support. At the same time, these trainings provided very practical strategies: how to differentiate instruction for students of varying ability, manage a classroom with diverse learners, and design and use IEPs. Tens of thousands of teachers across all regions participated – by the mid-2010s, virtually every school had staff exposed to core concepts of inclusion.

After that foundational phase, Serbia continued investing in educators' skills through two more "generations" of capacity-building. Between roughly 2013 and 2019, trainings became more specialised, enhancing pedagogical techniques such as individualised instruction, classroom management in an inclusive setting, formative assessment, and specific approaches for working with children with particular needs (for example, strategies for teaching students with autism or ADHD). UNICEF played a critical role in designing and rolling out many of these programs, often in partnership with local experts. From 2019 onward, a third wave of training introduced more innovative, peer-learning-based approaches. For instance, the SHARE project (supported by UNICEF) paired high-performing inclusive schools with struggling schools, fostering mentorship and horizontal learning. Communities of practice were established so that teachers could regularly meet (in person or online) to exchange experiences and solutions related to inclusion. This acknowledged that improving inclusive education is an ongoing learning process – educators benefit from continuous support and the ability to learn from each other, rather than one-off workshops. In sum, Serbia moved from basic awareness training to advanced skills training to cultivating professional learning networks, keeping teachers in a "learning loop" so that inclusion remained an active focus beyond a single workshop.

The scale of Serbia's teacher capacity-building is impressive. Between 2011 and 2023, over 45,000 educators and specialists received some form of in-service training on inclusive education. Moreover, Serbia recognised that teacher preparation needed to start *before* teachers ever entered the classroom. From around 2016, reforms were introduced in initial teacher education at universities to incorporate inclusive education into curricula. University professors of pedagogy were invited to join the in-service training efforts, working alongside master teachers as co-trainers, thus updating professors' own knowledge of modern inclusive practices. Some universities even launched centers of excellence in inclusive education (for example, at the Faculties of Philosophy in Belgrade and Niš) to focus on research and training in inclusive pedagogy. These steps help ensure that new graduates enter the profession with a foundation in supporting diverse learners, gradually reducing the need for remedial in-service training. In short, Serbia linked pre-service and in-service training into a continuum, an approach that other countries could follow to ensure that next generations of teachers are better prepared for inclusion.

Beyond teachers, other education stakeholders had their capacities strengthened as well. School principals were trained to become *instructional leaders* for inclusion – learning how to create an inclusive school culture, support their teachers, and allocate resources for support measures. Professional support staff like school psychologists and pedagogues received training to help

classroom teachers implement IEPs and new methodologies. A Network for Inclusive Education (Network for IE) was created in 2010 as a peer support network of about 120 experienced practitioners and experts. Over time, this evolved into a formal cadre of advisors – external associates as an inclusive-education experts available to schools – a systemic, sustainable resource that the Ministry can deploy when a school is struggling with a complex case. For example, if a school is having difficulty including a student with complex needs, an advisor-external associate from the respective school administration can visit, advise staff, and help solve problems. This ensures that expertise developed over years of reform is retained and shared nationally, creating an institutional memory for inclusion.

At the local community level, municipalities were supported to fulfil their roles in inclusive education. Local government officials and members of the intersectoral committees underwent training and mentoring (often facilitated by UNICEF and other partners) on how to monitor inclusion at the local level, develop Local Action Plans for Children, and coordinate across sectors (education, social welfare, health) to support families. UNICEF supported dozens of municipalities in drafting Local Action Plans that set inclusion objectives and concrete activities. These plans became forums for aligning local stakeholders–schools, health centers, social services, parent groups–and for budgeting local resources toward inclusive initiatives (for example, funding an assistant teacher or transportation for students with disabilities). Municipalities have also been encouraged to form local inclusive education networks to sustain peer support among schools and ensure knowledge and resources are shared within and between communities. Few municipalities have formal bodies for inclusive education that now have budgeted plans and support implementation of measures.

Another aspect of capacity is the availability of guidance and tools. In partnership with different partners and with UNICEF's support, Serbia developed a wealth of handbooks and manuals on inclusive education, grounded in rights-based and evidence-based practices. These practical guides (e.g. on how to develop and use IEPs, how to do differentiated instruction, how to prevent dropouts, how to assess the need for additional learning support) were distributed to schools and intersectoral committees to help them implement new approaches. In this way, knowledge wasn't only transferred via training but also captured in print and online resources that educators could continually reference. This added to the reform's sustainability – even as personnel change over time, the resources remain to guide new staff.

Finally, Serbia's teaching workforce is now required and incentivised to pursue continuous professional development, including in inclusive education. Under LoFES and subsequent regulations, teachers must complete a certain number of training hours (credits) every five years, and inclusion has been designated as a national priority area for accredited professional development programs. Many Ministry-approved training courses on inclusion count toward teachers' required hours. This policy keeps inclusion on the agenda for every teacher seeking career advancement. For instance, the official catalogue of accredited training programs for 2022–2026 lists 85 courses under the priority "application of an inclusive and democratic approach in education," covering topics from identifying students' needs to adapting teaching methods and working with parents. In summary, Serbia systematically built human capacity for inclusion at every level of the education system – national, local, school, and classroom – making inclusive education increasingly the norm in teaching practice and school management rather than the exception. This comprehensive capacity-building (much of it supported by UNICEF and other international partners) has been a cornerstone of the reform's impact and sustainability.

School-level mechanisms and inclusive practices

Real change is ultimately measured in schools and classrooms. Alongside policy and training, Serbia introduced numerous mechanisms at the school (and pre-school) level to drive inclusive practices and directly support students. One of the earliest and most influential changes (stemming from the 2009 law) was the requirement that every school establish a School Inclusion Team. Typically composed of teachers, the school psychologist or pedagogue, and a school leader,

these teams coordinate the school's efforts on inclusive education. Their tasks include identifying students who might need additional help, initiating the development of IEPs for those students, organising teacher peer-support sessions, and liaising with parents and external support services. By institutionalising such teams, Serbia ensured that inclusion was not left to individual teacher initiative – it became a shared responsibility within each school's management structure. Having a formal inclusion team created a designated group to champion and monitor inclusive practices. This mechanism, which UNICEF advisors had recommended during the drafting of LoFES 2009, proved effective in promoting a whole-school approach to inclusion rather than isolated efforts.

Another key focus at the school level has been preventing dropouts, which is integral to inclusion given that students from vulnerable groups historically had much higher dropout rates. Serbia developed an early warning system to flag students at risk of dropping out (using indicators like attendance and grades) and issued guidelines for schools on how to intervene. Schools began implementing measures such as remedial classes and tutoring for struggling students, mentorship programs where teachers or peers provide extra help, and stronger engagement with families to address absenteeism. Training and ongoing mentoring for school staff on dropout prevention was provided. Based on positive results from pilot projects in select schools (which saw dropout rates fall), many of these measures were incorporated into official policy. By the late 2010s, the Ministry had integrated an early warning and intervention system for at-risk students into national regulations, turning what started as a project-based innovation into a standard practice across all schools. In short, pilot efforts to reduce dropouts were scaled up through policy so that every school now systematically works to keep vulnerable students engaged.

Serbia's inclusive reform also had to respond to new challenges that emerged, such as the influx of refugee and migrant children during the 2015–2016 European migrant crisis. Previously, the education system had little experience with foreign or non-Serbian-speaking students. In line with its inclusive ethos, Serbia moved quickly to include refugee and migrant children in schools. The Ministry of Education, with UNICEF and EU support, set up a Learning Support Programme specifically for these children, focusing on Serbian language acquisition and basic skills (including digital literacy) to help them integrate. Provisional guidelines were issued to ensure immediate, unconditional enrolment of children on the move into primary schools, and to facilitate their enrolment into secondary education as well. In the following years, more permanent policies were developed: for instance, Serbia is preparing regulations to guarantee that refugee and asylum-seeking children can promptly access schooling just like any citizen child. A "National Welcoming Programme" was created for children on the move, and special Serbian-as-a-foreign-language courses were introduced to help them catch up academically. These efforts have been cited as a good practice in emergency inclusion – an education system already sensitised to inclusion (thanks to years of prior training) was able to accommodate a sudden wave of non-native students with relatively little friction, through strong cooperation between the Ministry, UNICEF, and the national refugee agency. By the late 2010s, Serbia had demonstrated that inclusive education principles could extend to *all* children in its territory, including refugees and migrants, even under crisis conditions.

Early childhood education (ECE) was another front for inclusive practices. Historically, pre-school (kindergarten) in Serbia had very low coverage, especially for marginalised groups, and some pre-schools even ran "developmental groups" – essentially segregated classes for children with disabilities. UNICEF advocated expanding ECE access as a way to foster inclusion from the very start of a child's educational journey. Pilot projects demonstrated ways to reach more vulnerable young children – for example, mobile kindergartens and community-based pre-schools for Roma settlements – and these successes informed policy. A new Preschool Curriculum Framework (PCF) was developed and implemented nationwide from 2018, embedding inclusive education principles and modern, child-centered pedagogy in pre-schools. The PCF encourages mixed-ability play and learning, valuing diversity as an asset in the classroom. However, remnants of the old system persisted: some children with disabilities were still being placed in entirely

separate pre-school groups, missing out on interacting with peers. To address this, Serbia's National Education Council proposed policy amendments to abolish "developmental groups" and instead utilise special educators as support staff within mainstream pre-schools (rather than running parallel segregated classes). If adopted, this policy would fully integrate pre-schoolers with disabilities into regular groups, with special educators acting as itinerant experts to assist teachers and children, rather than isolating the children. The clear trend in early education is toward inclusivity, ensuring that the foundations laid in kindergarten carry through to primary school.

Children with disabilities remain a central focus of inclusive education, and Serbia has enacted specific measures to support them in mainstream settings. As mentioned, LoFES 2009 banned the old practice of categorising/excluding these children, but the practical question was how to support their needs in regular schools. In 2010, Serbia adopted a Rulebook on Additional Educational, Health and Social Support for Children and Students (replaced by the actual one, adopted i 2018), a by-law formalising the process for identifying a child's need for support (educational or otherwise) and allocating resources or services to meet those needs. This ensures a legal right to accommodations such as individual classroom aides, assistive technology, or therapy, so a child with a disability can participate fully in school. In 2021, a Rulebook on Resource Centres was introduced, paving the way for an important new concept: transforming special education schools into resource centers that support mainstream schools. Rather than operating as separate institutions where children with disabilities are sent away, resource centers provide expert services to students and teachers in regular schools. In fact, Serbia began this transformation on a pilot basis as early as 2012, but the 2021 rulebook institutionalised it. Now, special schools are gradually being reimagined as hubs of expertise and support – lending out specialists (itinerant special educators, speech therapists, etc.) or equipment to mainstream schools, and even operating "assistive technology libraries". This approach aims to retain the valuable expertise of special educators while avoiding the segregation of children.

On the subject of assistive technology (AT) – tools like communication devices, specialised software, or adapted learning materials – UNICEF has been a key partner in expanding their provision. In recent years, UNICEF supported Serbia in developing a system to provide assistive technology to any child who needs it. This included creating assessment procedures, guidelines for matching devices to a child's needs, training on how to use AT, and a management system to track devices. UNICEF also donated a substantial amount of equipment, jump-starting an AT lending scheme whereby resource centers house collections of devices that can be loaned out to students in mainstream schools. In 2024, a web-based platform and online AT catalogue was developed as part of the National Education Portal to further streamline access to these technologies and connect educators, families, and service providers. The emphasis on AT reflects an understanding that technology can greatly enhance inclusion – for example, a tablet with a speech-generating app can allow a nonverbal child to participate in class, or a screen-reader can help a student with visual impairment access the curriculum. Serbia's goal is to ensure such solutions are not confined to a few pilot sites but integrated system wide.

Across these various initiatives, an important theme is intersectoral cooperation. Inclusive education doesn't happen in a vacuum – it overlaps with social welfare, healthcare, and community services. Serbia's establishment of local Intersectoral Committees (ISCs) was a novel attempt to institutionalise cross-sector collaboration for each child needing support. In practice, the ISCs bring together professionals from different sectors to develop a comprehensive support plan for a child (covering education, health, therapy, social sector/financial assistance, etc.), embodying the "social model" of disability (addressing environmental barriers and lack of supports rather than viewing the child's impairment as the problem). Aligning other sectors with this approach has been challenging, though. While the education sector moved decisively toward inclusion, the health and social protection systems in Serbia were slower to abandon the old "medical model" perspective. Disability policy reforms in health and welfare lagged behind those in education, meaning that at times ISCs struggled – for example, if a medical representative

on the committee still saw institutionalization as an acceptable solution, or if social services lacked resources to follow through on recommendations. This misalignment is an area requiring further work: harmonising definitions of disability, expectations of inclusion, and funding across sectors is essential for a truly holistic inclusion system. Still, the ISC mechanism was a bold step and remains a cornerstone of Serbia's approach, ensuring that children needing support are at least *visible* in the system and have a chance at receiving coordinated assistance.

In summary, at the level of schools and communities, Serbia's reform introduced concrete structures (school inclusion teams, municipal committees), practices (IEPs, early warning systems for dropouts, an inclusive preschool curriculum), and targeted programs (for Roma children, for refugees, for children with disabilities) that collectively create an ecosystem supportive of inclusion. Many of these began as donor-supported pilots or responses to urgent needs, but over time they have been woven into the fabric of the education system. The continuous thread has been UNICEF's support – whether in conceptualising programs, funding initial phases, or providing technical expertise to turn pilot successes into national policy. By the late 2010s, Serbia had many of the building blocks of an inclusive system in place, from the classroom to the national ministry, all interacting in a systematic way to support every child.

Data-driven decision making and monitoring

From the outset, Serbia understood that lasting reform requires not only action but also reflection – gathering data, evaluating progress, and adjusting accordingly. Improving data collection and monitoring was therefore a vital part of the inclusive education reforms. At the system level, efforts proceeded along several tracks. First, around 2015 Serbia developed a comprehensive Inclusive Education Monitoring Framework (with UNICEF's assistance). This framework set out indicators and standards to assess how well schools, local authorities, and the country as a whole were implementing inclusive education in line with national goals and international standards. It covered areas such as enrolment rates of vulnerable groups, availability of support services, teacher training levels, and the inclusiveness of school climates. The monitoring framework gave the Ministry and partners a clearer picture of where progress was being made and where gaps remained. In 2023, the framework was refined – for example, adding more indicators to capture local-level implementation – reflecting the recognition that local data (municipal and school-level) is needed to truly track inclusion on the ground.

Secondly, Serbia undertook a series of evaluative studies and research to guide policy. A rapid assessment of the new inclusive education measures was conducted soon after the 2009–2010 reforms to get early feedback. In 2015, a cross-sectoral analysis examined education through a poverty/equity lens, highlighting disparities. UNICEF supported a formative evaluation of inclusive practices (2009–2014) that was completed in 2016, to examine what was working and what needed adjustment. Notably, in 2015–2016 an evaluation looked specifically at the quality of education in special schools and special classes. The findings were eye-opening: students in segregated settings were often receiving an inferior education, and many could be included in mainstream schools with proper support. This evidence strengthened the case for accelerating the transformation of special schools into resource centers (as discussed earlier). In other words, data was used to overcome inertia and push the system further toward inclusion. Additionally, studies were conducted on financing models – for instance, exploring public-private partnerships to expand preschool access, and analysing funding modalities for early childhood education – as part of the broader push to expand equitable access to quality early education. All these research efforts provided an evidence base to inform policy tweaks and resource allocation.

Another critical data initiative was the overhaul of the Education Management Information System (EMIS). Serbia introduced unique student identification numbers, allowing the tracking of individual students' progress through the system and disaggregation of data by background characteristics. With a more robust EMIS, it became possible to identify, for example, how many children with disabilities are enrolled

in regular schools or compare attendance and achievement patterns of Roma students versus others. Such data is invaluable for pinpointing remaining inequities and designing targeted interventions. By analysing EMIS data, policymakers could see trends like "hotspots" of dropout, the impact of inclusive measures on learning outcomes, or where additional support staff might be needed. EMIS also helps ensure no child falls through the cracks unnoticed – since each child has an ID, those who drop out or never enrol can be more easily identified and reached (in theory). Many of the EMIS improvements, supported by UNICEF and the EU, contributed to fostering a culture of evidence-based policymaking in education.

Serbia's commitment to data is also evident in its regular national reports on inclusive education. These reports (covering periods like 2015–2018, 2019–2021 and 2022-2024) provide periodic reviews of the state of inclusive education. They include statistics on key inclusion indicators, qualitative findings from school inspections, and updates on implementing legislation. For instance, Serbia's external school evaluation system – which evaluates each school on a rotating cycle – now explicitly checks for inclusive practices (such as whether the school has an effective inclusion team, whether teachers differentiate instruction, etc.). The results feed into the national reports. By institutionalising such monitoring and reporting, Serbia ensures that inclusive education remains a visible priority, and that successes and shortcomings are transparent. Notably, one of these reporting initiatives began as a UNICEF/EU-supported project but has since become a regular government practice.

All this data and monitoring has yielded concrete evidence of progress and has guided adjustments. For example, data from the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS) – large household surveys supported by UNICEF – captured changes in education indicators over time. Comparing MICS data from the mid-2000s to 2019 shows significant improvements. Early childhood education attendance (ages 3–5) rose dramatically: from roughly 50% of children attending pre-school in 2014 to about 61% in 2019. (This is around double the rate from the early 2000s – a remarkable jump, though still leaving room for further growth.)

The increase was especially pronounced in rural areas: pre-school attendance in rural communities climbed from ~27% in 2014 to 46% by 2019. MICS data also showed a narrowing gap in primary education. In 2005, only 74% of Roma children were attending primary school, versus over 98% of children in the general population – a huge disparity. By 2019, primary school attendance was almost universal across the board: about 99.6% for the general population and 93% for children in Roma settlements. Likewise, primary school attendance among the poorest households climbed to virtually the national average by 2019. These statistics illustrate that Serbia's reforms in access – abolishing exclusionary practices and proactively including marginalised children – have succeeded in bringing nearly all children into primary education.

The data on secondary education, while still showing disparities, also indicate progress. Secondary school attendance among Roma youth was extremely low in the mid-2000s (around 10% in 2005); by 2019 it had nearly tripled to about 28%. Though this is still far below the national secondary attendance (roughly 94% in 2019 for the general population), the trajectory is upward. In fact, net secondary attendance for Roma girls doubled from 15% in 2014 to 27% in 2019 – still only one-third of the national average but clearly improving. Other vulnerable groups also advanced: for the poorest quintile of households, secondary school attendance rose from ~64% in 2005 to 81% in 2019. These gains can be attributed to measures like affirmative action (e.g. scholarship and mentorship programs for Roma high-schoolers), better preparation and support during primary school, and local initiatives encouraging continuation to upper secondary. Completion rates reflect similar patterns: nearly 97% of children overall complete primary school, but only ~64% of Roma children do – indicating the challenge that remains. For secondary education, about 87% of general population youth graduate, whereas roughly 61% of Roma youth do. Serbia's data systems thus highlight both substantial progress in inclusion *and* persistent gaps requiring attention. The transparent, evidence-based approach – supported by robust information systems and research (often in partnership with organisations like UNICEF, OECD, and the Open Society Foundations) – has helped maintain momentum

for the reform by celebrating achievements while candidly identifying remaining challenges.

It's worth noting that Serbia's inclusive mindset and investments in EdTech proved valuable during crises as well. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020 and schooling shifted to remote learning, marginalised students everywhere were at risk of being left behind. In Serbia, the existence of an inclusion mindset helped shape the response. With UNICEF and EU support, Serbia rapidly expanded digital learning platforms (like an online national learning platform and educational TV programming) to reach all students. Importantly, efforts were made to ensure these remote learning solutions were accessible (providing devices or printed materials to those who needed them, creating content for students with disabilities, etc.). The crisis reinforced the need for flexibility and innovation in reaching every child – lessons that Serbia is now integrating into its ongoing inclusive education approach.

Remaining challenges and gaps

Despite over a decade of reforms and clear progress, Serbia's journey to full inclusion is not complete. Building an inclusive education system is a long-term endeavour, and several challenges persist – some systemic (needing further policy or structural changes) and others more practical or attitudinal (needing mindset shifts or resources on the ground).

Financial and resource constraints pose a serious challenge. Inclusive education, done right, requires investment – hiring support staff, training teachers, modifying buildings for accessibility, procuring assistive devices, etc. Yet Serbia's public expenditure on education has been under pressure, with tight government budgets in recent years. Declining or stagnant education spending can undermine the implementation of inclusive policies. Poorer municipalities struggle to allocate local funds for inclusive education needs. For instance, laws might declare that a child is entitled to a pedagogical assistant or transportation to school, but if funding isn't available at local level, those supports may not materialise in practice. International donors (World Bank, EU, UNICEF and others) provided crucial funding during the reform's first decade, but donor priorities can shift. Serbia faces the risk of a funding gap as some external projects end. If government does not fully take over financing of certain services (like pedagogical assistants or continuous teacher training), those services could stall. In short, achieving a sustainable financing model for inclusion – one that mitigates regional inequities and secures adequate resources long-term – is a pressing task. In 2024, UNICEF supported a Feasibility Study for financing of inclusive education offering three models to improve efficiency, as well as introduction of earmarked transfers to local self-government and flexible grants to schools. The Ministry of Education will need to work with the Ministry of Finance on potential reforms, to ensure that funds flow where they are needed most.

Another deeply rooted challenge is persistent inequities in outcomes for marginalised groups. As the data showed, access to education has greatly improved, but the *quality* of outcomes (learning and progression) for groups like Roma children, children with disabilities, or those in extreme poverty still lags behind. For example, Roma students still have disproportionately high dropout rates before the end of secondary education. Many factors outside school contribute to this – poverty requiring children to work, early marriage among some Roma girls, or feelings of alienation at school – and schools alone cannot solve all of them. Likewise, children with disabilities might now be formally enrolled in mainstream schools, but some receive only token inclusion – they may be physically present yet spend much of the day separated from peers or without meaningful learning. There is also concern about what happens *after* schooling. Students with disabilities who finish high school often find no clear pathways to vocational training or employment, leaving them dependent on the welfare system. The education system can't resolve employment issues alone, but it can do more to prepare students for transitions and advocate for inclusive post-secondary opportunities. More broadly, linking education with employment and community life – especially for the most disadvantaged – remains a gap. Serbia still lacks robust second-chance education programs or strong school-to-work transition supports for youth who don't go to university (such as many Roma youth or youth with disabilities). Without such pathways, the gains of inclusive schooling risk evaporating after graduation.

Educational quality and learning outcomes remain an overarching challenge. While inclusion has advanced equity in access, Serbia is still grappling with raising overall student achievement and reducing disparities between schools. PISA results, although slightly improved in recent years, indicate that on average Serbia performs below the OECD mean, with a large variance between high-performing and low-performing schools. Many low-performing schools are those with concentrations of disadvantaged students. This suggests that inclusive education's promise – to improve quality for all – is not yet fully realised, perhaps due to uneven implementation quality. Some teachers, despite attending trainings, still lack a deep understanding of inclusive pedagogy; they might *differentiate lessons on paper* to meet requirements, but not truly adapt instruction effectively in practice. Teachers often cite lack of time, large class sizes, or insufficient specialist support as barriers to implementing what they learned. There is anecdotal evidence and some surveys indicating that classroom practices haven't transformed as deeply as hoped. In other words, there is a difference between formal compliance (having an IEP, having an inclusion team, etc.) and actual change in teaching and learning processes. This points to the need for ongoing support, mentoring, and accountability to ensure that inclusive pedagogy moves from theory into genuine, school-wide practice.

Related to this is the challenge of attitudes and cultural change. Serbia's reforms have definitely shifted mindsets overall – surveys show greater acceptance among educators and the public that children with disabilities belong in regular schools, for instance, compared to 15 years ago. But attitudes do not change overnight. There are still segments of society (and some educators) who are sceptical about full inclusion. Some teachers and parents quietly question if inclusive education "lowers standards" or if certain children might be better off in special settings. Resistance can also be institutional: parts of the special education profession understandably felt threatened by the changes. Serbia did make efforts (e.g. via resource centers) to give special educators a continued, valuable role, but not all felt assured. The reform could have benefitted from an even stronger communications campaign early on to build a shared understanding (this point is discussed further in Lessons Learned). In any case, continuous advocacy and sensitization are needed to solidify inclusion as a non-negotiable value throughout society.

At the local governance level, challenges persist in clarifying roles and building capacity. Education in Serbia is primarily a national responsibility, but municipalities have certain duties related to support to inclusive education (school facilities maintenance, co-funding of assistants, transportation, etc.). Many local authorities, especially poorer ones, find it difficult to fulfil these responsibilities for inclusion due to limited budgets or expertise. Some municipalities still do not have active local inclusion plans or committees, despite the national mandate. This uneven local capacity means the experience of inclusion can differ from one community to another. Strengthening municipal-level commitment and capacity – through funding incentives, training for local officials, and perhaps clearer legal obligations – is an area for improvement.

Finally, there have been some policy ambiguities and backtracks that signal caution. Notably, Serbia's laws still technically allow special classes in some form. After 2009, there was a period when all special classes were banned to push full inclusion, but later regulations re-introduced the option of special classes for certain cases. This inconsistency sent mixed messages and likely reflects a degree of pushback or caution within the system. Opponents of inclusion pointed to the reintroduction of special classes as evidence the policy "was not working." The continued existence of any segregated streams indicates that achieving *full* inclusion is still a work in progress. Ultimately, reaching the end goal would mean those special classes are rendered unnecessary – but that requires the system to build enough capacity and confidence to support every child in a mainstream setting. Until then, the policy ambivalence could slow momentum. The lesson here (again elaborated later) is that a country moving toward inclusion should define early on what will happen to its special education sector and stick clearly to that plan, to avoid confusion and resistance down the line.

Lessons from Serbia's experience and recommendations for other countries

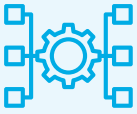
Serbia's decade-plus journey toward inclusive education offers valuable insights for other countries. This chapter distils key lessons learned from Serbia's reform experience–each paired with a concrete recommendation.

1. Strong Legal Foundations and Policy Commitment. A solid legal and policy framework is the cornerstone of inclusive education reform. Serbia's transformation began with the 2009 Law on the Foundations of the Education System, which enshrined the right of all children to participate in mainstream schooling and mandated additional support for those with special needs. This law signalled a shift from a "medical model" (viewing disabilities as a defect to be treated) to a "social model" focused on removing barriers and providing accommodations in regular schools. Backed by high-level political commitment, Serbia's legislative reforms established inclusion as a national priority and aligned subsequent strategies (e.g. the Education Development Strategy 2030) with this vision.

Recommendation: Countries should begin inclusion reforms by establishing a comprehensive legal mandate for inclusive education. Enact or update education laws to guarantee every child's right to attend regular schools without discrimination, paired with policies that operationalise this right (such as regulations on school accessibility, individualised support, and anti-discrimination measures). High-level policy commitment must accompany legislation – inclusion should be embedded in national education strategies and action plans, ensuring all institutions share a clear vision. A strong legal foundation not only provides legitimacy and direction for reform but also holds systems accountable to deliver inclusion.

2. Building Teacher Capacity for Inclusion. Teacher preparation and support determine the effectiveness of inclusive education in the classroom. Serbia learned that passing laws is not enough if teachers lack the skills and confidence to teach diverse learners. Early in the reform, many Serbian teachers had limited training in special needs education, leading to inconsistencies in practice. In response, Serbia introduced pre-service and in-service training programs on inclusive techniques and created school-based expert teams to help teachers adapt curricula and instruction. Over time, thousands of teachers in Serbia received training on individual education plans, differentiated instruction, and managing classroom diversity. Even so, the national report found that teacher capacity indicators remained among the weakest links in school inclusivity, underscoring that continuous professional development is essential.

Recommendation: Invest in comprehensive teacher training and ongoing support as a top priority for inclusive education reforms. This includes revising teacher education curricula to cover inclusive pedagogies and universal design for learning and providing regular in-service training on adapting teaching methods to diverse needs. Training should be practical and continuous, with coaching, mentorship, or peer learning networks so teachers can exchange experiences and refine their skills over time. Countries should also establish school-based support teams or resource centers (drawing on special educators, psychologists, or experienced teachers) to assist classroom teachers in problem-solving and implementing individualised strategies.



3. Support Structures and Services for Inclusive Education: Dedicated support structures are crucial to translate inclusive education policy into practice. Serbia's experience shows that schools need additional human and material resources to meet diverse student needs. Over the reform period, Serbia put in place several support mechanisms: introducing pedagogical assistants for Roma children and children with dsabilities, and personal companions for children with disabilities, forming inclusive education teams within schools, and establishing intersectoral

committees at the local level to coordinate education, health, and social services. Serbia also grappled with defining and professionalising these support roles – for instance, clarifying the tasks of pedagogical assistants vs. personal companions – and ensuring consistent funding for such positions. Another lesson from Serbia is the value of intersectoral collaboration: local committees involving educators, social welfare and health professionals were created to assess children's needs and recommend support (such as therapy, assistive devices, or social services), fostering a holistic approach to inclusion.

Recommendation: Establish robust support services and coordination mechanisms to underpin inclusive education. Other countries should create formal roles for support personnel – such as classroom assistants, special educators, or therapists – and integrate them into the education system (through defined job descriptions, training, and stable financing). It is advisable to institutionalise these roles (e.g. by adding an official cadre of inclusion support assistants) so that schools can reliably employ trained staff to support teachers and students. Furthermore, develop cross-sector referral and support networks: set up local or regional committees that bring together schools, health, and social services to assess and address complex student needs. Governments should allocate specific budget lines for inclusive education supports – covering assistive technologies, accessible materials, and specialised services – so that recommendations (such as providing a personal aide or mobility aids for a student) can be implemented in a timely manner.

4. Evolving the Role of Special Schools. The transition to inclusion requires rethinking the role of special schools and other segregated institutions. Serbia's reform illustrates that special schools can evolve from isolated settings into resources for the inclusive system. Rather than abruptly closing all special schools, Serbia encouraged a gradual transformation. Special schools continue to exist for cases of severe or complex disabilities (often if parents opt for that placement), but their expertise is increasingly made available to support mainstream schools. This approach leverages the strengths of special schools (small student-teacher ratios, specialised methods) to benefit a broader range of children. Serbia's lesson is that inclusive education is not achieved simply by moving children physically into regular classrooms, but by infusing the mainstream with the expertise and supports that were traditionally found only in special settings.

Recommendation: Repurpose and integrate special school expertise into the mainstream education system. Other countries should chart a careful course whereby special schools and their staff become partners in inclusion. This can involve converting special schools into resource centers or hubs for teacher training, diagnostic services, and material development to aid nearby inclusive schools. Special educators can be deployed as traveling consultants or co-teachers in mainstream classrooms. Policies should also facilitate dual placements or part-time attendance arrangements, where students spend most time in regular classes but can receive specific instruction or therapy at special institutions as needed (this aligns with providing a continuum of support). Importantly, any ongoing role for special schools must be aligned with the ultimate goal of inclusion – for instance, using them only for short-term intensive support or for students whose needs truly cannot be met in a regular class despite accommodations.

5. Engaging Parents and Communities. Public perception and understanding of inclusive education significantly influence reform success. Serbia discovered that engaging parents and the wider community is essential to overcome resistance and sustain inclusion. Early on, some Serbian parents and educators were uncertain about inclusive education or feared that bringing children with disabilities or from Roma communities into mainstream schools might slow down learning for others. To address this, Serbia undertook awareness campaigns and local outreach. The Ministry, with UNICEF and NGOs, organised school-level information sessions and disseminated easy-to-understand materials to explain what inclusive education entails and how it benefits all children. These efforts were aimed at dispelling myths and highlighting positive outcomes (such as improved social skills, reduced

prejudice, and academic gains for all students in diverse classrooms). Over the years, attitudes in Serbia began to shift as success stories of inclusive schools were publicised. Another aspect of engagement was involving parents of vulnerable children in decision-making – for instance, Serbian schools formed parent councils that included representatives of children with disabilities or from minority groups. By giving such parents a voice, schools built trust and better understood student needs.

Recommendation: Prioritise communication, advocacy, and stakeholder involvement alongside technical reforms. Other countries should launch public awareness campaigns about inclusive education's benefits, targeting common concerns with evidence and examples. This might include workshops for parents at school level, media campaigns showcasing inclusive education success stories, and peer learning between families (for example, parent support groups where families of children with and without disabilities share experiences). Education authorities should provide clear, accessible information on how inclusion works in practice – explaining new services (like assistants or individualised plans) so parents understand that supports are in place. Additionally, involve parents and communities in the reform process: include parent representatives (especially from vulnerable groups) in school boards or councils, consult community leaders when developing inclusion policies, and partner with disabled persons' organisations and advocacy groups to champion the cause.

6. Personalised Instruction and Flexible Curriculum. One-size-fits-all education does not work in an inclusive setting – individualised approaches are key. Serbia's reform underscored the importance of tailoring education to each student's needs. The 2009 law required schools to develop Individual Education Plans (IEPs) for students who need additional support, detailing necessary curriculum adaptations, teaching methods, and learning aids. In practice, this meant adjusting lesson content, allowing alternative assessment methods, or setting personalised learning goals for students with disabilities or those lagging behind. Serbia also introduced the concept of *modular instruction* – rather than excusing a student from an entire subject due to difficulties, schools could modify the subject material or focus on essential components, so the child remains engaged in learning.

Recommendation: Adopt child-centered teaching with flexible curricula and assessment in all schools pursuing inclusion. Other countries should mandate and facilitate the use of individual education plans (or similar personalised learning plans) for students who require them. Teachers should have access to tools and training to differentiate instruction – for instance, providing multi-sensory learning materials, adjusting the difficulty level of assignments, or giving additional time for tasks. Curricular guidelines should allow *flexibility*: set core learning outcomes but permit modifications or alternative pathways for students who learn differently. Assessment methods should also be flexible (e.g. oral exams, project work, or portfolio assessment for students who cannot take standard written tests).

7. Equity Focus: Reaching All Marginalised Groups. An inclusive education system must proactively reach all vulnerable groups of children, not only those with disabilities. Serbia's reform experience shows that inclusion should be viewed broadly as education for any child at risk of exclusion. Alongside children with developmental disabilities, Serbia identified Roma children and those from low socio-economic backgrounds as groups facing persistent barriers in education. Over the past decade, measures such as affirmative action in enrolment, provision of free preschool for low-income families, Roma teaching assistants, and community liaison programs were used to boost the inclusion of Roma and poor children. Another equity aspect Serbia faced was geographical disparities – some regions or municipalities lagged in implementing inclusive education due to uneven distribution of resources and pilot projects. The reform showed that without deliberate efforts to cover all areas (urban and rural, developed and less-developed regions), certain communities would have fewer inclusive programs or trained staff, leaving vulnerable children in those localities behind.

Recommendation: Apply an equity lens to inclusive education reforms, targeting interventions to marginalised groups and under-served areas. Countries should start by using data to identify which children are most frequently excluded or segregated – for example, children with severe disabilities, ethnic or linguistic minorities, girls in certain regions, nomadic or migrant children, or the very poor. Design inclusion strategies that address the specific barriers these groups face. This might mean hiring bilingual teaching assistants for minority-language children, offering scholarships or free meals and transport for children in poverty, running anti-discrimination training for educators, or collaborating with community mediators to build trust with minority communities. Set enrolment and retention targets for each vulnerable group to ensure progress is monitored and gaps close over time. In addition, ensure that inclusion programs have national reach: allocate additional resources and support to regions or districts that have fallen behind in implementing inclusive practices.

8. Monitoring, Evaluation, and Continuous Improvement. Serbia's journey highlights that inclusive education reform is an ongoing process that requires regular monitoring and adaptation. After more than a decade of efforts, Serbia has made notable gains – for example, rising numbers of children with disabilities attending mainstream schools, fewer students in special schools, and more children from vulnerable groups in early education. Yet, the reform is not "finished"; gaps persist in quality and equity, and new challenges continue to emerge. Recognising this, Serbia established mechanisms to evaluate progress and inform policy adjustments. Serbia also invested in data systems: for instance, developing a national education information system that tracks students with additional support needs, and requiring schools to self-evaluate their inclusive practices annually. A key lesson here is that policymakers must be willing to learn and course-correct.

Recommendation: Implement strong monitoring and evaluation (M&E) frameworks to drive continuous improvement in inclusive education. Countries should build a data-driven approach: establish indicators for inclusion (e.g. enrolment rates of children with disabilities, attendance and completion rates for vulnerable groups, school accessibility measures, teacher training coverage, etc.) and collect data regularly at school and system levels. Develop or enhance education management information systems to include disaggregated data on children with special educational needs and other at-risk groups. In parallel, conduct periodic evaluations – both internal (school self-assessments) and external (independent reviews or inspections) – to gauge the quality of inclusion in classrooms and identify bottlenecks. It is advisable to publish findings (as Serbia did with its National Report) to maintain transparency and accountability. Crucially, ensure that there are feedback loops: use the evidence gathered to update teacher training content, reallocate resources, or adjust policies. Institutionalise learning and adaptation by setting up working groups or advisory boards on inclusive education that periodically review progress and recommend course corrections. Finally, share and celebrate successes and innovations identified through monitoring – this keeps stakeholders motivated and spreads effective practices.

Serbia's inclusive education reform teaches us that committed action, coupled with flexibility and persistence, can yield transformative results in schooling equity. Each country will need to tailor reforms to its context, but the overarching insight remains universal: inclusive education is a continuous journey of system-wide learning and adaptation, one that ultimately benefits not only marginalised children but every learner and society as a whole.

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